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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 001965

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SA/INS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/15/2015

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: BOTH SIDES CONFIDENT, CALCULATING WIN
ON PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION EVE

REF: COLOMBO 1943

Classified By: AMB. JEFFREY J. LUNSTEAD. REASON: 1.4 (B,D).

SUMMARY

[11.](#) (C) One day before the presidential election campaign insiders for both major candidates remained confident of claiming a decisive, if narrow, victory. Strategists for Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) candidate Mahinda Rajapakse seem sure that their contender will clinch a significant slice of the Muslim vote in the east, while planners for United National Party (UNP) candidate Ranil Wickremesinghe are counting on a swing vote in the south to put their man over the top. As of mid-day on November 16, there had been no reports of major disturbances. The local press on November 16 carried a report about a Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam get-out-the-vote effort that appears to be spurious. End summary.

UNP SAYS SOUTH SWINGING THEIR WAY

[12.](#) (SBU) With a moratorium on campaigning in effect since November 15, the streets of Colombo were largely calm (if not necessarily clear of now-illegal partisan banners and posters), and as of mid-day on the eve of the November 17 presidential election, there had no reports of major disturbances or electoral violence anywhere in the country. Voter turnout in most areas of the country, with the notable exception of areas controlled or influenced by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the north and east, is expected to be high.

[13.](#) (C) Campaign strategists for United National Party (UNP) candidate Ranil Wickremesinghe appeared undaunted by the LTTE decision not to encourage voters in Tiger territory to cast their ballots (Reftel). On November 16 UNP MP and Wickremesinghe confidant Milinda Moragoda told the Ambassador and DCM that his party remains confident that its candidate can still pull off a victory, even without the 300,000 or so Tamil votes from uncleared areas. UNP insider Dinesh Weerakkody told econ chief the same day that while his party was initially concerned about the LTTE position, the thinking now is that the Tigers' cold shoulder will actually help Wickremesinghe's chances in the south. Weerakkody reported that two recent sets of UNP-sponsored polls both showed (perhaps not surprisingly) Wickremesinghe winning, with the more credible giving the UNP candidate a two percent edge, based on a favorable swing vote in the south. Weerakkody added that the party is expecting the election to be largely peaceful, and credited outgoing President Chandrika Kumaratunga for helping ensure free and fair polls and the police with playing a positive role.

SLFP: EDGE IN THE EAST

[14.](#) (C) SLFP campaign planner Kanchana Ratwatte sounded similarly upbeat in a November 16 conversation with poloff. Like his UNP counterpart, Ratwatte also predicted a narrow margin of victory for his candidate--approximately 52-53 percent, according to the party's most recent calculations--especially now that the UNP could no longer count on the vote in LTTE-controlled areas. He discounted a November 16 banner headline in a pro-Wickremesinghe newspaper claiming that the LTTE had reversed its stand as UNP disinformation. Turn-out to SLFP rallies by Muslim voters in the east had increased, Ratwatte claimed, and the party remains confident of capturing a large slice of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress vote bank there.

LTTE: NO GET-OUT-THE-VOTE
EFFORT

[15.](#) (C) The November 16 editions of the pro-UNP English-language Daily Mirror and its Sinhalese-language

sister paper Lankadeepa ran front-page articles, citing unsourced "reports," claiming that the LTTE, in an apparent about-face from a November 10 decision not to encourage voting (Reftel), had told Tamil National Alliance (TNA) MPs "to make arrangements to transport voters from uncleared areas to cluster polling booths located in government areas tomorrow to vote" and that LTTE propaganda vehicles had called on "the people of the northeast to cast their vote at tomorrow's election." Lest any reader assume the LTTE might be telling people to vote for the UNP candidate, however, "none of the announcements carried messages about who to vote for," the report stated. Three TNA MPs staunchly denied the report to us, however, maintaining that the LTTE had instructed that November 17 be observed as a day of mourning in Tamil areas and that people not show up for work. The LTTE is "not happy" about the stand taken by either candidate on the peace process, TNA MP Mavai Senathirajah told us. (See Septel IIR from DAO about another press report of campaign machinations.)

COMMENT

16. (C) Both campaigns sound genuinely confident of certain--if narrow--victory, an indication of just how tight this race promises to be. While the LTTE position is discouraging, the absence of election-related violence so far is a positive sign that we obviously hope holds true on election day. We will be watching the situation closely, assisted by informal Embassy monitoring teams in eight different districts, which will be observing the election process on November 17 and reporting their findings to us throughout the day.

LUNSTEAD